

Message Text

PAGE 01 MOSCOW 13722 011644Z

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ACTION EUR-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 NEA-10 IO-14 NIC-01 SAJ-01 EURE-00

ACDA-19 PM-07 NSC-10 SPC-03 SS-20 RSC-01 CIAE-00

INR-10 NSAE-00 DODE-00 PRS-01 AF-10 DRC-01 /134 W

----- 005716

P 011539Z NOV 73

FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3588

C O N F I D E N T I A L MOSCOW 13722

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PINT, UR

SUBJ: SOVIET LEADERSHIP ASPECTS OF MIDDLE EAST CRISIS

REF: A. MOSCOW 13566; B. MOSCOW 13416; C. MOSCOW 13615

1. SUMMARY: THE EVENTS OF THE PAST WEEKS MAY REVERBERATE FOR A LONG TIME IN SOVIET LEADING CIRCLES, RAISING QUESTIONS ABOUT DETENTE WITH THE U.S., SOVIET MILITARY POSTURE, AND THE QUALITY OF BREZHNEV'S LEADERSHIP. IF ATTENTION IS FOCUSED ON THE NIGHT OF OCTOBER 24-25 AS A U.S.- SOVIET SHOWDOWN COMPARABLE TO 1962, PROBLEMS WITHIN THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP MIGHT BE SHARPENED. SUCH PROBLEMS MAY BE MITIGATED, HOWEVER, SO LONG AS THE IMPERATIVES FOR SEEKING A MORE STABLE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE U.S. CONTINUE TO INFLUENCE SOVIET POLICY; WE SEE NO EVIDENCE OF CHANGE THUS FAR. A POSITIVE EFFECT SHOULD ALSO FLOW FROM THE CURRENT U.S. POLICY OF ACKNOWLEDGING THE SOVIET ROLE IN POLITICAL EFFORTS TOWARD A MIDDLE EAST SETTLEMENT, FURTHER DEVELOPING BILATERAL RELATIONS, AND DOWNPLAYING THE CONFRONTATION ASPECT OF LAST WEEK'S DEVELOPMENTS. END SUMMARY.

2. SOVIET HANDLING OF THE MIDDLE EAST CRISIS REFLECTS MOSCOW'S DETERMINATION TO MAINTAIN ITS PRESENCE AND TO INCREASE ITS INFLUENCE IN AN AREA WHICH IT CONSIDERS IMPORTANT FOR STRATEGIC, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL REASONS. CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 02 MOSCOW 13722 011644Z

THIS HAS LED MOSCOW TO PLACE A HIGH PRIORITY ON THE MAINTENANCE OF A CREDIBLE POSTURE WITH THE ARABS. IT HAS ALSO MEANT EXPLOITING EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO GAIN THE LONG-SOUGHT POSITION OF EQUAL STATUS WITH THE U.S. AS AN

ARBITER IN MIDDLE EAST AFFAIRS.

3. IN THIS EFFORT, THE SOVIETS PREFERRED TO AVOID DIRECT MILITARY CONFRONTATION WITH THE U.S. AND, IF POSSIBLE, UNNECESSARY JEOPARDY TO BREZHNEV'S "PEACE PROGRAM."

4. THE OUTCOME OF NEGOTIATIONS IN MOSCOW WITH THE SECRETARY ON OCTOBER 20-21 COULD THUS BE REPRESENTED BY BREZHNEV AS CONSISTENT WITH THESE AIMS. PARAGRAPH TWO OF SC RESOLUTION 338, TOGETHER WITH THE CEASE-FIRE WHICH WAS TO HALT AN ISRAELI ADVANCE, PERMITTED THE SOVIETS TO POSE AS THE DEFENDER OF ARAB INTERESTS. THE OFFER OF JOINT GOOD OFFICES FOR NEGOTIATIONS GAVE THEM A POTENTIAL EQUAL STATUS WITH THE U.S. IN HELPING THE PARTIES WORK OUT A SETTLEMENT. BREZHNEV COULD ALSO DESCRIBE THE MOSCOW TALKS AS A DEMONSTRATION OF GREAT POWER RESPONSIBILITY AND EVIDENCE OF THE CONCRETE ADVANTAGES OF DETENTE: A MAJOR TEST HAD BEEN PASSED.

5. IT IS SIGNIFICANT THAT BREZHNEV HIMSELF TOOK ON THE PRIMARY NEGOTIATING RESPONSIBILITY, INSTEAD OF DELEGATING IT TO GROMYKO, A POLITBURO MEMBER AND THE SECRETARY'S COUNTERPART, OR TO KOSYGIN, WHO HAD JUST MADE THE TRIP TO CAIRO. PRESUMABLY, HE DID SO BOTH BECAUSE HIS DETENTE POLICY WAS SO MUCH AT RISK AND BECAUSE THE POTENTIAL LAURELS WERE GREAT. WHATEVER THE REASON, HIS PRESTIGE BECAME VERY MUCH ENTWINED IN THE COURSE OF EVENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

6. THE PICTURE OF SOVIET MOTIVATIONS IN THE PERIOD BETWEEN THE SECRETARY'S VISIT TO MOSCOW AND THE U.S. ALERT IS NOT CLEAR. WE ARE NOW SEEING A SOVIET ATTEMPT TO PUT AN INNOCENT FACE ON SOVIET ACTIONS IN THAT PERIOD, BASED ON A ALLEGED SOVIET BELIEF THAT ISRAELI MILITARY ACTIONS AFTER THE FIRST CEASE-FIRE MEANT THAT THE U.S. HAD NOT FULFILLED ITS SIDE OF THE MOSCOW UNDERSTANDING (REF A). SHITIKOV'S EMOTIONAL OUTBURST TO TOW AMERICAN CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 MOSCOW 13722 011644Z

JOURNALISTS (REF B) FITS THIS PATTERN.

7. IN ATTEMPTING TO LOOK BELOW THIS COVER STORY, EMBASSY WOULD GUESS THAT CONTINUED ISRAELI ADVANCES AFTER THE CEASE-FIRE HAD PUT SOVIET CREDIBILITY IN THE ARAB WORLD TO THE TEST, AND THAT BREZHNEV'S ROLE IN THE U.S.- SOVIET UNDERSTANDING HAD COME INTO QUESTION. IN THESE CIRCUMSTANCES, IT WAS APPARENTLY DECIDED TO BRING HEAVY PRESSURE TO BEAR ON THE U.S. TO BRING ISRAEL AROUND.

8. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE AT THIS POINT TO JUDGE HOW THE SOVIETS GAUGED PROBABLE U.S. REACTIONS. PERHAPS THEY DID NOT EXPECT WASHINGTON'S ACTION TO BE AS FIRM AS

IT WAS, BUT IT SEEMS UNLIKELY THAT THEY WOULD HAVE EXCLUDED THIS AS A POSSIBILITY. THUS, THEY MUST HAVE AT LEAST BEEN AWARE OF THE RISKS THAT THEIR ACTIONS ENTAILED, AND CONCLUDED THAT THEY NEVERTHELESS HAD TO SEEK TO SALVAGE THE SOVIET POSITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST NOTWITHSTANDING THE RISK OF A TEMPORARY SETBACK TO DETENTE. IT IS NOT INCONCEIVABLE THAT THERE WERE ARGUMENTS WITHIN THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP ON THE QUESTION OF HOW TO REACT TO FAILURE OF THE FIRST CEASE-FIRE, WITH THE ARGUMENT FINALLY TILTING IN FAVOR OF HARD-LINERS, INCLUDING SOME WHO ALSO HARBORED DOUBTS ABOUT SOME ASPECTS OF DETENTE.

9. IN ANY CASE, THE REVERBERATIONS OF THE OCTOBER 24-25 DEVELOPMENTS MAY BE ECHOING FOR SOME TIME TO COME-- BOTH IN U.S.-SOVIET RELATIONS AND WITHIN THE SOVIET LEADERSHIP. THE BREZHNEV LEADERSHIP WAS IN A POTENTIALLY VULNERABLE POSITION: CRITICS COULD CHARGE THAT THIS WAS A REPLAY OF 1962, AND THAT MOSCOW AGAIN BLINKED. IF OCTOBER 1973 ACQUIRES THE SAME STIGMA OF A SOVIET BACKDOWN. THERE COULD AGAIN BE CONSEQUENCES WITHIN THE LEADERSHIP.

10. THE UNDERLYING REASONS FOR MOSCOW'S PURSUIT OF DETENTE REMAIN, AND THE EMBASSY HAS SEEN NO EVIDENCE AT THE WORKING LEVEL WHICH WOULD INDICATE OTHERWISE. WE BELIEVE BREZHNEV IS STILL COMMITTED TO THAT POLICY, AS REFLECTED IN HIS PEACE CONGRESS SPEECH, ALTHOUGH THAT SPEECH ALSO INDICATES THAT HE IS TRIMMING HIS SAILS TO CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 MOSCOW 13722 011644Z

SOME DEGREE (REF C). THE POSSIBILITY CANNOT BE OVERLOOKED THAT HE MAY HAVE BECOME MORE VULNERABLE TO THE VIEWS OF CRITICS AS A RESULT OF MIDDLE EAST DEVELOPMENTS AND HIS INVOLVEMENT THEREIN. (IT IS NOT WITHOUT INTEREST, FOR EXAMPLE, THAT AT THE END OF A LONG FOREIGN POLICY SPEECH HE REVEALED STATISTICS OF A RECORD GRAIN HARVEST, THUS IN EFFECT CLAIMING A MAJOR ACHIEVEMENT FOR HIS LEADERSHIP.)

11. UNDESIRABLE FALLOUT CAN BE MINIMIZED BY CURRENT U.S. POLICY OF SEEKING TO EMPHASIZE THE POSITIVE AND, HAVING ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THE USSR HAS A MAJOR ROLE TO PLAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST (THE GOOD OFFICES CONCEPT), TO ENGAGE MOSCOW IN A CONSTRUCTIVE, JOINT EFFORT TO ACHIEVE PEACE IN THE REGION, AT THE SAME TIME CONTINUING EFFORTS TO IMPROVE OUR BILATERAL RELATIONS. IT SEEMS CLEAR THAT WE HAVE A BETTER CHANCE OF ATTAINING THESE GOALS IF WE CONTINUE TO MINIMIZE THE CONFRONTATION ASPECTS OF THE OCTOBER 22-25 PERIOD.
DUBS

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 11 MAY 1999
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: MOBILIZATION, DETENTE, ARMED FORCES, MILITARY PLANS, FOREIGN POLICY POSITION
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 01 NOV 1973
Decaption Date: 01 JAN 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: garlanwa
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1973MOSCOW13722
Document Source: ADS
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: 11652 GDS
Errors: n/a
Film Number: n/a
From: MOSCOW
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1973/newtext/t19731166/abqcegbe.tel
Line Count: 163
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE
Office: ACTION EUR
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators:
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: A. MOSCOW 13566; B. MOSCOW 13416; C. MOSCOW 13615
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: garlanwa
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 28 SEP 2001
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <28-Sep-2001 by willialc>; APPROVED <05-Dec-2001 by garlanwa>
Review Markings:

Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
30 JUN 2005

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: SOVIET LEADERSHIP ASPECTS OF MIDDLE EAST CRISIS
TAGS: PFOR, PINT, UR, US, XX, IS
To: STATE
Type: TE
Markings: Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005